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Social class, ethnicity and access to higher education in the four countries of the UK: 1996-2010

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Abstract

This paper compares access to full-time undergraduate higher education (HE) by members of less advantaged social classes and ethnic minorities across the four 'home countries' of the UK. It uses data on applicants to HE in selected years from 1996 to 2010. In all home countries students from intermediate and working-class backgrounds retained a broadly level share of a rising total participation in HE, while ethnic minorities increased their share. Intermediate and working-class students were more likely to study within their own home country, as were ethnic-minority students in England, but minority students from Northern Ireland and Scotland were much more likely than whites to study elsewhere (usually England). Some aspects of the admissions process appear to have been 'unfair' to lower-class applicants; this was the same across the UK although the relative success of applications from colleges and independent schools, which might accentuate or mitigate inequalities, varied across the home countries. In England and Wales ethnic-minority applicants were less likely to be offered a place but they compensated (only partially in the case of older universities) by gaining entry through clearing; in Scotland they were as likely to be offered a place but less likely to enter HE. The paper discusses the potential of such comparisons for benchmarking and for policy learning. It concludes that the similarities between the home countries are more substantial than their differences, and that administrative and political devolution in the 1990s has had little impact on inequalities in HE. There is no evidence of a significant impact of the divergence between market policies in England and the more social-democratic policies of the devolved administrations.

Introduction

Other papers in this special issue compare patterns and trends in access to higher education (HE) across member states of the European Union. In this paper we compare access across the four constituent territories of a single member state: the UK. We focus on social class and ethnicity as criteria for measuring inequalities in access, and we compare entrants domiciled in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which we refer to as the 'home countries' of the UK.

Numerous studies have documented the existence, scale and possible causes of inequalities in access to HE in the UK, and especially to higher-status universities (e.g. Forsyth and Furlong 2000, Reay, David and Ball 2005, Gorard et al. 2007, Chowdry et al. 2008, David 2010). A few studies have examined the 'fairness' of the admissions process with respect to candidates from different social and ethnic backgrounds (Shiner and Modood 2002, Boliver 2013). Some researchers have investigated trends over time, although most trend studies have focused on social class rather than ethnicity (Raffe et al. 2006, Cheung and Egerton 2007, Boliver 2011, Iannelli, Gamoran and Paterson 2011). Very little research has been carried out into how these levels and trends of inequality have varied across the home countries of the UK. In this paper we exploit the unique data series collected by the UK's unified admissions service, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). We use population data on selected cohorts of applicants to HE between 1996 and 2010, to address three questions:

- How has the social-class and ethnic composition of entrants to HE changed over the period, in each home country?
- To what extent do entrants from different social-class and ethnic backgrounds concentrate in different HE institutions in each home country, and has this changed?
- To what extent is the admissions process equally 'fair' for candidates from the four home countries?

Why compare the home countries?

There are several possible reasons for comparing access to HE across the four home countries (Raffe et al. 1999, Raffe 2007). The first is to indicate the impact of devolution. Despite their distinct histories and institutional arrangements, described below, universities in England, Scotland and Wales were centrally governed and funded on a Britain-wide basis before 1992; HE in Northern Ireland was administered separately but closely followed the rest of the UK (Osborne 1996). In 1992, separate funding councils were created for Scotland and Wales, responsible to the 'territorial' Scottish and Welsh Offices of the UK government; these devolved administrative arrangements were

placed under the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales when these were established in 1999. Since 2000 HE in Northern Ireland has been answerable to the new power-sharing Assembly, except for periods when this was suspended, of which the longest was between 2002 and 2007. The consequences of devolution for HE are of obvious interest within the UK, and even more so in the context of debates about Scottish independence. They are of potential interest beyond the UK, as they illustrate tensions experienced in many countries between pressures for convergence associated with globalisation or internationalisation and pressures for divergence associated with political decentralisation (Gallacher and Raffe 2012).

A second reason is benchmarking. Compared with other cross-national comparisons, within the UK the 'other things' are more nearly equal: the home countries have at least broadly similar institutions, cultures and contexts. The comparisons therefore identify policy outcomes that are achievable in similar circumstances and provide benchmarks for assessing each country's performance. Benchmarking is further facilitated by the availability of standardised UK-wide statistics; the home countries' HE systems are easier to compare than those of other countries – and easier to compare than the home countries' school systems (Croxford 2006). We exploit this advantage in our analyses of UCAS data below.

A similar rationale applies to the third reason for comparing the home countries: the potential to support policy learning. The similarities between the systems may allow policy lessons, if not specific policy measures, to transfer more easily between them. Devolution, it is commonly argued, has created a 'UK policy laboratory' in which new ideas can be tested in one country before they are considered for adoption or adaptation elsewhere. Most mutual learning of this kind has focused on small, incremental policy changes in such areas as widening participation, economic development and research funding. The devolved administrations, with their proportional electoral systems and more consensual policy styles, have tended to avoid radical changes in policy direction. Instead, the most radical shifts have occurred in England, where HE has become increasingly 'marketised' (Brown with Carasso 2013), reflected in successive increases in tuition fees towards a maximum of £9000 p.a. from 2012. Initially, Northern Ireland and Wales had little choice but to follow England's lead but Wales has twice introduced compensating grants for its own domiciled students to offset the effects of the fee rises and Northern Ireland did not introduce the 2012 fee rise for its own students. Scotland abolished up-front fees for full-time undergraduate students in 2000, soon after its Parliament was established; they were replaced by a smaller, deferred payment which in turn was

abolished in 2007. The analysis reported below does not show the impact of the 2012 changes, but it may reveal the impact of the divergent policy trends that preceded them.

The contrasting policies on tuition fees appear to reflect broader ideological differences, with England moving towards a market-driven system while ‘the social democratic governments in the devolved countries ... seem to be moving in some respects towards a more traditional European model of higher education’ (Bruce 2012: 99, Tapper 2007). A fourth possible reason for comparing the UK HE systems is to contribute to debates about social and educational change in different societal ‘regimes’ – a theme of other articles in this special issue. However, the extent to which the home countries truly exemplify different societal regimes is debatable. Their economies and labour markets are substantially integrated and cannot be said to exemplify different ‘varieties of capitalism’ (Hall and Soskice 2001). A comparison of school-to-work transitions before devolution found few differences in the four countries’ transition systems – that is, in the institutional arrangements which shape transition processes and outcomes (Raffe, Brannen and Croxford 2001). However, Esping-Andersen’s (1990) concept of ‘welfare regimes’, ideal-typical relationships between state, market and family, provides a possible basis for distinguishing the home countries. The UK as whole is generally seen as a liberal welfare regime, in which the market plays a larger role, but this is most characteristic of England; Scotland and Wales have some features of a social-democratic regime, including universalism and a preference for the state rather than the market as provider of public services including for the middle classes. The differences should not be exaggerated; the welfare state itself remains a British (rather than Scottish or Welsh) creation, and public attitudes in Scotland and Wales are not significantly more ‘social-democratic’ than in England (Curtice and Heath 2009). Divergent policies for tuition fees are a product of the different political systems rather than of different public attitudes (Gallacher and Raffe 2012).

The UK HE systems: similarities and differences

As we have seen, the rationale for comparing the four home countries’ HE systems rests partly on the similarity of their institutions, cultures and contexts. This similarity has been sustained and enhanced over the years by a history of shared government, by the unified arrangements for admissions, research funding and infrastructural support, by the persistence of UK-wide professional, subject and policy organisations and by the flows of staff and students between the four countries. Nevertheless, there are differences between the four systems. They differ in size. The analyses reported below cover, in the most recent year (2010), 264 HE institutions in England, 19 institutions in Scotland, 18 institutions in Wales and four institutions (of which two were

universities) in Northern Ireland; 84% of UK-domiciled applicants to HE in 2010 were from England. The systems differ in the porousness of their boundaries; the proportion of students who leave their home country to study varies widely, as we see below. The country comparisons in this paper are based on the domicile of students rather than on the location of institutions, but access for students from Wales and Northern Ireland depends on opportunities elsewhere in the UK, to a greater extent than for students from England or Scotland.

Institutional structures vary across the four HE systems, reflecting their different histories as well as differences in size. HE institutions throughout the UK vary in their status, in the qualifications they require for entry and in the labour-market prospects of their graduates. Universities in England form a hierarchy headed by the 'ancient' universities and other members of the Russell Group, a membership organisation of large 'research-intensive' universities. The next tier comprises other universities established before 1992, and universities founded after 1992 form a bottom tier. Before 1992 universities were organised and funded on a different basis from polytechnics and other institutions. Compared to universities the polytechnics had a stronger vocational orientation, with less emphasis on research; their location in large cities and their more flexible programmes encouraged a stronger emphasis on wider access, although by 1992 their missions had tended to converge with universities. In 1992 this binary system was abolished and replaced by a formally unified (but highly stratified) system, in order to increase competition and widen opportunity, and because the polytechnics showed a greater willingness to expand student numbers (Brown with Carasso 2013). However, the status differences associated with the old binary divide have persisted (Raffe and Croxford forthcoming).

Scottish institutions also form a hierarchy, comprising four ancient universities founded before 1600, four other 'old' universities founded before 1992 and (as at 2010) six new universities created since 1992, although the latter have distinctive origins as state-controlled Central Institutions rather than polytechnics. The distinction between pre- and post-1992 universities has less significance in Wales, where several institutions which became universities after 1992 are relatively old foundations which had been members of the federal University of Wales. Wales retains a large number of small institutions. The pre-/post-1992 distinction also has little meaning in Northern Ireland, where both universities were founded before 1992, and one of them was a product of the UK's only merger of a university and a polytechnic.

In all four countries HE programmes may be provided in HE institutions (mostly universities) or in colleges of further education. The proportion of full-time HE students who are based in colleges is higher in Scotland (15.8% in 2009-10) and Northern Ireland (11.2%) than in England (1.6%) and Wales (0.6%) (UUK 2011: 8). In all parts of the UK college-based students are more likely to come from less advantaged social backgrounds. However, many colleges do not recruit through UCAS so the analyses in this paper cover entrants to HE institutions only. This means that our comparisons may underestimate the breadth of access in Scotland and Northern Ireland relative to the other home countries. However, they may be a more reliable guide to relative trends in participation; the relative shares of colleges and HE institutions has not changed radically, despite the desire by the government in England (and to a lesser extent Northern Ireland and Wales) to focus expansion on the college sector (Parry 2009). Most undergraduates entering HE institutions study for bachelor degrees, although a small proportion of English entrants (about 4.5% in 2010), and even smaller proportions in Wales and Northern Ireland, take short-cycle foundation degrees.

A significant minority of English and Scottish applicants, but very few from Wales or Northern Ireland, are from independent (private) schools. In all four countries some applicants have gained their qualifications for entry to HE in colleges; these are usually secondary-level academic or vocational qualifications but some college-based applicants, especially in Scotland, have short-cycle HE qualifications, which may provide credit towards bachelor degrees under articulation arrangements between colleges and universities (Raffe and Howieson forthcoming).

Data

The analyses below are outcomes of the Nuffield-funded project on *Changing transitions to a differentiated Higher Education system*. Details of the project, and of the UCAS data, are provided by Croxford and Raffe (2011a, b). The data cover applicants and entrants through UCAS to full-time undergraduate programmes in HE institutions in the UK. They cover applicants in six years: 1996, 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010. They cover all ages, although analyses of social class are restricted to under-21s as this information was not collected on the same basis for older applicants.

Applicants through the UCAS main scheme may apply to up to five (formerly six) courses at different institutions in an annual round. Each application results in an unconditional offer, a conditional offer or a rejection by the institution concerned. Each applicant must choose which offer to accept, with a second 'insurance' offer if the first-choice offer is conditional. Those with no offers may make further applications. When applicants' own qualifications are available, and the outcomes of

conditional offers are known, candidates without a place may enter a new 'clearing' round. In 2010 60% of applicants were accepted through the UCAS main scheme, 11% through clearing or other channels and 29% were not accepted or refused offers (up from 21% in 2008). This system is uniform across the UK although the percentages vary (for example, more Scottish applicants achieve entry qualifications before making their applications and receive unconditional offers; fewer Northern Irish applicants enter through clearing).

The social-class and ethnic composition of entrants to HE

We now consider our first research question, about changes in the composition of entrants to HE in each home country. We identify as entrants those who were recorded by UCAS as accepting a confirmed offer of a place in an HE institution, including those who entered through clearing. Some of these 'entrants' may have changed their mind before starting the course; conversely, some people may have been accepted directly by the institution rather than through UCAS.

Between 1996 and 2010 the total number of entrants rose by 56% in England, 37% in Wales, 50% in Northern Ireland and 33% in Scotland (based on the domicile of students). Our data need to be understood in the light of this expansion. If a class or ethnic group has remained constant as a proportion of all entrants this does not mean that participation has levelled off among this group, but merely that it has grown no faster than among other groups. And this, broadly speaking, is what we find in relation to entrants from working- or intermediate-class backgrounds.

[figure 1 about here]

UCAS asked applicants aged under 21 to state the occupation of the parent, step-parent or guardian 'who earns the most'. Their responses were coded into the Registrar General's (RG) classification in 1996 and 2000 and the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) from 2004 onwards. The data in figure 1 show the percentage with an 'intermediate' or 'working' class background: RG classes III, IV and V and classes 3 to 7 of the seven-class version of NS-SEC. Percentages are based on all those with occupations that could be coded. The two classifications are not directly comparable so we can draw no conclusions from the apparent difference between the 2000 and 2004 figures. However, the broadly horizontal trends before and after these dates indicate that the social composition of HE did not change much over the period. (Data for 2008 are also excluded from the chart because a change in wording for that cohort only reduced comparability). Figure 1 refers to intermediate and working-class entrants; a further chart showing the percentages solely from working-class backgrounds reveals a similar, broadly level trend. The differences

between countries largely reflect different class distributions within their respective populations, with smaller middle-class populations in Wales and (especially) Northern Ireland than in England or Scotland. However, between 2004 and 2010 the trend, although broadly level, differed subtly across the countries. The proportion of entrants from intermediate- and working-class backgrounds rose slightly in Wales and England, and fell slightly in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Further analyses, not shown here, show that the decline in Scotland and Northern Ireland was steeper among males than among females. It is hard to explain this apparent divergence across the home countries, although it is of interest that access narrowed in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK over a period, 2004-10, when Scotland abolished its remaining charge for full-time undergraduate HE, while the other home countries all raised their fees.

[figure 2 about here]

In all four home countries ethnic minorities increased as a proportion of entrants to HE (figure 2). The UCAS data are based on self-reports; we use the term ‘visible ethnic minorities’ for all who described themselves as anything other than white. They formed a much larger proportion of entrants in England (23% in 2010) than in Scotland and Wales (6-7%) or Northern Ireland (2%), reflecting differences in the respective populations. The increase in participation by ethnic minorities partly reflects their growing share of each country’s population. Between the 2001 and 2011 Population Censuses ethnic minorities increased from 9.0% to 14.6% of the total population in England, from 2.1% to 4.4% in Wales and from 0.8% to 1.7% in Northern Ireland. (Scottish data are not available at the time of writing.) Other research (eg Chowdry et al. 2008) shows that most ethnic minorities have been *over-represented* in English HE, especially once allowance is made for different levels of prior attainment. Moreover, ethnic minorities have been more likely to take advantage of opportunities for mature students; in all home countries ethnic minorities have accounted for a larger proportion of entrants aged 21-plus than of under 21s (28% and 21% respectively in England in 2010). The proportion from ethnic-minority backgrounds was very slightly higher among male than female entrants, but the male and female trends were almost identical. Ethnic inequalities also intersect with class: except in Northern Ireland, ethnic minorities have been more strongly represented among intermediate- and working-class entrants to HE than among entrants from professional and managerial backgrounds. However, they have increased as a proportion of entrants from all classes and the rise in ethnic minority participation cannot be ‘explained’ in terms of social class. Nor has it affected all minority groups equally. Between 1996 and 2010 the proportion of English-domiciled entrants from Asian backgrounds remained almost unchanged, at 11% in 2010, while the proportion of black entrants rose from 4% to 8%, and the

proportion from other minority backgrounds rose from 2% to 5%. This is despite the fact that the Asian, black and 'other' minority populations grew at a similar rate between the two Census dates.

[table 1 about here]

Where do they study? Home country

Table 1 shows the percentage of 2010 entrants who moved to a different country of the UK to study. More than a third of Welsh and Northern Irish students did so, compared with much smaller proportions from England and Scotland (4% and 6% respectively). In each country students from professional and managerial backgrounds were more likely than those from intermediate- or working-class backgrounds to go elsewhere to study. The differences between ethnic groups are more surprising. Minority students from England were much less likely than majority (white) students to study in another home country; minority students from Scotland, Northern Ireland and (to a lesser extent) Wales were much more likely to do so. When Asian and black students are separated out the pattern is further complicated: black students were the least likely ethnic group in Wales, and the most likely in Scotland, to study in another home country.

The proportion of students from each country who studied elsewhere in the UK declined over the period (Raffe and Croxford 2013). This trend towards home-country study may have been encouraged by fee changes, but it also affected cohorts of students for whom the differential costs of study in the home country and elsewhere remained constant. There was a trend for English students to study in their region of domicile, but the home-country trend was stronger than the home-region trend.

[figures 3 and 4 about here]

Where do they study? Type of institution

In 1996, at the beginning of our period of study, the post-1992 universities were all, by definition, recent foundations; the subsequent decade and a half saw considerable organisational change, with several mergers, closures and new foundations, as well as policies designed to promote competition and diversity among universities. One might have expected the distinction between pre- and post-1992 universities to lose its significance over this period. However, other analyses undertaken by the project, using objective measures of institutional status based on applicants' choices, show that status differences between the sectors have remained stable over the period (Croxford and Raffe 2011a, Raffe and Croxford forthcoming).

We focus on England and Scotland, as the distinction between pre- and post-1992 universities has less significance in Wales or Northern Ireland. In England, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, entrants from intermediate- and working-class backgrounds were more likely to enter a university founded after 1992 (figure 3). (Figure 3 excludes non-university institutions.) The differences in the proportions of ethnic minority students among entrants to the two sectors narrowed over time in England (figure 4). This was largely a consequence of the changing destinations of Asian students, who disproportionately entered post-1992 universities at the beginning of the period and disproportionately entered pre-1992 universities at the end of the period. There was less change in the entry patterns of black students, who continued to be disproportionately represented in the post-1992 universities.

[table 2 about here]

Fair admissions

Our third research question asked if the admissions process was equally fair for candidates from the four home countries. We address this question in stages. We first ask whether applicants from different social or ethnic backgrounds were equally likely to be successful. Table 2 shows the crude ‘success rates’ of applicants from different class and ethnic backgrounds, that is, the proportion of applicants to HE who became entrants, as defined above. Overall success rates fluctuated over time; they were lowest among the first and last cohorts covered by our study. They also differed across the home countries, notably in Northern Ireland where success rates were lower than elsewhere in the early part of our period, but closer to the other home countries later. This appears to have resulted from an increase in the supply of HE places within Northern Ireland, which alleviated the pressures on Northern Irish students to go elsewhere to study. In each cohort and in each home country success rates were higher among applicants from professional- and managerial-class backgrounds than intermediate- or working-class backgrounds, and they were nearly always higher among white applicants than those from visible ethnic minorities. (The main exception is Northern Ireland, where the overall numbers of minority applicants were lowest.) Thus, although a majority of candidates were successful and the social-class and ethnic composition of entrants to HE in each home country broadly reflected the composition of applicants, the admissions process – that is, the sequence of steps which led from application to entry – appears to have favoured majority-ethnic applicants and those from advantaged social classes.

However, this did not necessarily reflect unfairness if these applicants were better qualified. To what extent was the process ‘fair’ with respect to comparable applicants from different social or

ethnic backgrounds? Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression analyses in which qualifications are used, along with class, ethnicity, gender, independent school or college background, the number of applications and country, to predict the outcome of applications to HE by applicants aged under 21 in 2010. We model three outcomes. The first model predicts whether an applicant received an offer (conditional or unconditional) from any of their main-scheme applications. The second model predicts entry through the main scheme of UCAS, excluding those who entered through clearing or other forms of direct entry. The third model predicts any entry to HE, as in table 2. Our analysis thus aims to separate the different stages of the admissions process; however, it does not take account of other factors such as the varying propensity to make ‘easy’ applications to institutions with less demanding entry requirements.

[table 3 about here]

As we would expect, qualifications are an important predictor of applicants’ success. The UCAS tariff enables different qualifications to be compared in terms of a single points score; we have converted this to normalised scores expressed as standard deviations among applicants from each country, with an average for each country of zero. Our normalised variable assumes, in effect, that the average applicant from each country was equally qualified. As a result the country comparisons, which in table 3 show the highest overall success rates among comparable applicants in Wales and the lowest in Northern Ireland and Scotland – may partly reflect ‘real’ differences between qualification levels which we have assumed away in our calculations. Our analysis focuses on whether the admissions process is equally fair *within* each home country, not whether it is fair in its treatment of applicants from different home countries. For the same reason, we also control for the interactions between qualifications and home country. We include two additional transformations, the square and cube of the normalised score, to take account of different probabilities at the top and bottom extremes of the qualification score.

Each model includes all statistically significant country interactions. The absence of interactions with social class therefore means that the social-class ‘effects’ on the outcomes of applications did not differ significantly across the four home countries. Working-class and unclassified applicants were less likely than comparable peers to receive an offer of a place (model 1), although only the unclassified group was less likely to enter HE through the UCAS main scheme (model 2). Working-class applicants tended to apply to institutions with less demanding entry requirements, so among candidates with comparable qualifications they would be more likely to meet the conditions attached to offers. Rather more surprisingly, the class differences re-emerge in respect of all

entries to HE (model 3), suggesting that candidates from professional and managerial backgrounds were more likely to find a place through the clearing process if they did not succeed in the main scheme of UCAS. It is possible that these candidates made more ambitious 'insurance' choices among conditional offers, and were consequently accepted onto fewer of them and had to rely more frequently on the clearing process to achieve a place. In England independent-school applicants were less likely than comparable peers, and college students were more likely, to receive an offer and to enter HE. These differences at least partly offset social-class inequalities, as independent schools and colleges tended to cater for higher and lower social-class students respectively. The independent-school effect was specific to England: it did not apply in Scotland and very few Welsh or Northern Irish applicants were from independent schools. College students were more likely to receive an offer if they were domiciled in England or Wales (those from Northern Ireland were less likely to receive an offer) but college students from all four home countries, and especially those from Scotland, were more likely to enter HE than comparable fellow-applicants. The greater success of college-based applicants in Scotland could be due to college-university articulation arrangements, in which candidates would typically have a good chance of meeting the conditions attached to offers (Raffe and Howieson forthcoming). It is also likely that the independent-school and college 'effects' partly reflected the courses applied to, with independent-school applicants choosing more demanding courses and college applicants favouring the easier ones. We explore this further below.

In England and Wales ethnic-minority applicants were significantly less likely to be offered a place, or to enter HE through the UCAS main scheme, than comparable whites. However, they used the clearing process to reverse this disadvantage, and ended up with a higher chance of success relative to their qualifications and other characteristics. In Scotland ethnic-minority applicants were at least as likely as their white peers to be offered a place, but they were less likely to enter HE, whether through the main scheme or clearing. Ethnic-minority Scots were more likely than whites to apply to English universities, so their lower entry rates may have reflected second thoughts about studying at a substantial distance from home. There were too few ethnic-minority applicants from Northern Ireland for clear trends to be observed.

Our focus in this paper is on social class and ethnicity, but the gender differences in table 3 deserve comment. In all home countries males were more likely to receive offers than comparable females, and they were more likely to enter HE through the main scheme and/or clearing. This may reflect their choice of subjects with lower entry requirements. The gender difference was larger in

Northern Ireland than elsewhere, possibly reflecting the courses available in Northern Ireland institutions.

The concept of fair admissions implied in these analyses is a narrow one. It assumes that HE institutions are not responsible for the social and ethnic composition of their applicants, and that selection should be based on qualifications rather than other indicators of the potential to succeed in HE. Current policies challenge both these assumptions (Parry 2010, Boliver 2013). However, our data cover only applicants, and measures their qualifications but not (directly) their potential, so we are restricted to this narrower concept of fairness. In terms of this concept, our evidence suggests that the admissions process may be slightly unfair with respect to social class, but with no evident differences across the home countries. Unfairness in respect of ethnic minorities is mitigated by their effective use of the clearing process, except in Scotland where ethnic-minority applicants are less likely than comparable whites to enter HE by any route, a trend which may be connected with their relative preference for English rather than Scottish universities.

Our analysis so far takes no account of the heterogeneity of HE, and in particular the fact that some institutions demand entry higher qualifications than others. It is unlikely that this heterogeneity explains social-class differences in the probabilities of receiving an offer, because among similarly-qualified applicants those from lower social groups tend to apply to institutions with less demanding entry requirements, so we would expect them to be more likely to receive an offer rather than less likely as shown in table 3. We can allow for some of this heterogeneity by looking at the success of applications only to pre-1992 universities, which tend to have higher entry requirements. Other research on 'fair admissions' in UK HE has focused on access to the more prestigious institutions, either pre-1992 universities or sub-sectors such as the Russell Group (Shiner and Modood 2002, Boliver 2013). Table 4 presents an analysis which parallels that of table 3 but is based on applications and applicants to pre-1992 universities only. Like the previous analysis of pre- and post-1992 universities (figure 3 above) it is restricted to England and Scotland.

[table 4 about here]

Once again there are no significant country interactions with social class. Working-class and unclassified applicants were less likely to receive an offer from a pre-1992 university than comparable peers (model 1) – the same pattern as we observed in respect of all HE institutions in table 3. Boliver's (2013) analysis of earlier UCAS data suggests that this partly reflects the particular school subjects in which qualifications were held, but we do not have data to test this. However, in

contrast to the analysis of all HE institutions, the social-class effects become stronger and more pervasive in respect of actual entry to pre-1992 universities (models 2 and 3). The analysis compares similarly qualified applicants, so this finding suggests either that higher-class applicants tended to accept conditional offers with easier requirements or, more probably, that they were more likely to accept an offer from a pre-1992 university - in preference, perhaps, to a post-1992 institution. The clearing scheme made little difference (model 3). Independent-school applicants in England were as likely as comparable peers to receive an offer from a pre-1992 university, and in Scotland they were more likely to do so. In both countries they were more likely to enter a pre-1992 university. These figures contrast with the analysis for all HE (table 3 above), and are consistent with our suggestion that independent-school applicants tended to choose more demanding institutions. This reduced their chances of receiving an offer from any HE institution, but not from the more demanding pre-1992 institutions. Conversely, the favourable success rate of college students in table 3, which may have reflected their tendency to apply to easier institutions, is partly reversed in respect of pre-1992 universities, but with an interesting country difference. In both countries college-based applicants were less likely to receive an offer from a pre-1992 university than comparably-qualified peers. However, whereas college applicants in England were as likely as their peers to enter a pre-1992 university, in Scotland they were much more likely to do so. This is unlikely to reflect the distinctive Scottish articulation arrangements, described above, as these mainly involved post-1992 institutions.

As in the analysis of all HE, ethnic-minority applicants from England were less likely to receive an offer of a place in a pre-1992 university and they were less likely to enter one through the main scheme. However, they only partly compensated for this through the clearing system, probably because fewer places in pre-1992 universities were available through this route. Our analysis is consistent with Shiner and Modood's (2002) earlier analyses showing ethnic inequalities in admissions to older universities. Scottish ethnic-minority applicants were as likely as comparable white applicants to be offered a place in a pre-1992 university, but less likely to enter one.

In general, there is evidence of somewhat greater 'unfairness' in entry to pre-1992 universities than to HE as a whole, although in neither case can we completely separate outcomes due to decisions by institutions from those due to decisions by applicants. In both cases there are no discernible differences between the home countries with respect to 'fairness' between social classes, although they may differ slightly in the way that colleges and independent schools accentuate or mitigate inequalities. The home countries appear to differ in the 'unfairness' of the admissions process regarding ethnic-minority applicants: in England and Wales they are less likely to be offered a place

but they compensate (partially in the case of pre-1992 universities) by gaining entry through clearing; in Scotland they are as likely to be offered a place but less likely to enter HE.

Conclusions

Earlier we listed four reasons for comparing access across the four home countries. The first was to indicate the impact of parliamentary devolution. On the evidence of this paper, this impact has been modest. Particularly with respect to social class, the similarities in processes and outcomes revealed above have been more impressive than the differences. Such differences as we have observed, especially in relation to ethnicity, are often compositional in origin, or are the consequence of supply constraints. They also tend to pre-date parliamentary devolution: there is little evidence of divergence in these analyses. To use the terms introduced by Rees and Istance (1997), the divergence in the administrative systems of HE has not been accompanied by significant divergence in their social systems. Of course, this partly reflects the fact that we have been studying processes regulated by a UK-wide administrative structure, namely the UCAS admissions service. But the research nevertheless provides a salutary reminder of the limited power of policy to change fundamental social processes of inequality and social reproduction. And it provides few grounds for expecting Scottish independence to have a transforming effect.

The relative similarity of the four systems makes the second purpose of comparing these systems, benchmarking, all the more appropriate. Each home country can reasonably use the others as guides to what is achievable, if not necessarily what is desirable. Comparisons of absolute levels of performance may need to be qualified by contextual differences; for example, working-class representation in HE is higher in Northern Ireland partly because of the higher distribution within the relevant population, and the analysis of Scotland needs to allow for the important role of college-based HE which is not covered by these data. Nevertheless, comparisons of *trends* in performance are less likely to need such qualification; the relative decline in participation by lower social groups in Scotland, albeit small, is a matter of legitimate concern. And some comparisons of absolute performance should ring alarm bells, such as the apparent inability of the devolved countries (and, again, especially Scotland) to cater for their own ethnic-minority populations.

The third reason for home-country comparisons, to support policy learning, is closely related. This paper has provided a broad overview of patterns and trends in access to HE; it has identified areas where more detailed analysis might support policy learning, but it has not provided all the evidence needed for such learning. It raises such questions as: to what extent is the higher participation by

intermediate and working-class students from Northern Ireland and Wales associated with the modest role of independent schools in their respective school systems? What lessons can be learnt from the varying (but complex) role of college-based applications in the admissions process, notably the successful outcomes of Scottish college-based applicants to pre-1992 universities? What can be learned from England's apparent success in catering for its ethnic minorities within its own HE institutions, and in reducing the differences between the ethnic composition of the pre-and post-1992 sectors?

The most important policy lesson from our analysis is linked to the fourth reason for comparing the home countries: to assess the impact of different societal regimes. While we are sceptical of the extent to which the home countries genuinely exemplify different regimes of this kind, it is widely accepted that policies since devolution have seen a divergence between a neo-liberal, market approach in England and a more social-democratic philosophy, based on HE as a public good, in the devolved countries and especially in Scotland. An important conclusion of this research is that there is no evidence that the social-democratic approach has generated greater equality or wider access than the market approach. Indeed, to the extent that there is any difference in trends it is probably in the other direction. It remains to be seen whether this reflects the relatively short period over which policies and 'regimes' have diverged, the limitations of social-democratic policies as currently implemented or the inability of state policies to overcome deep-rooted social inequalities and the increased interdependence of national HE systems.

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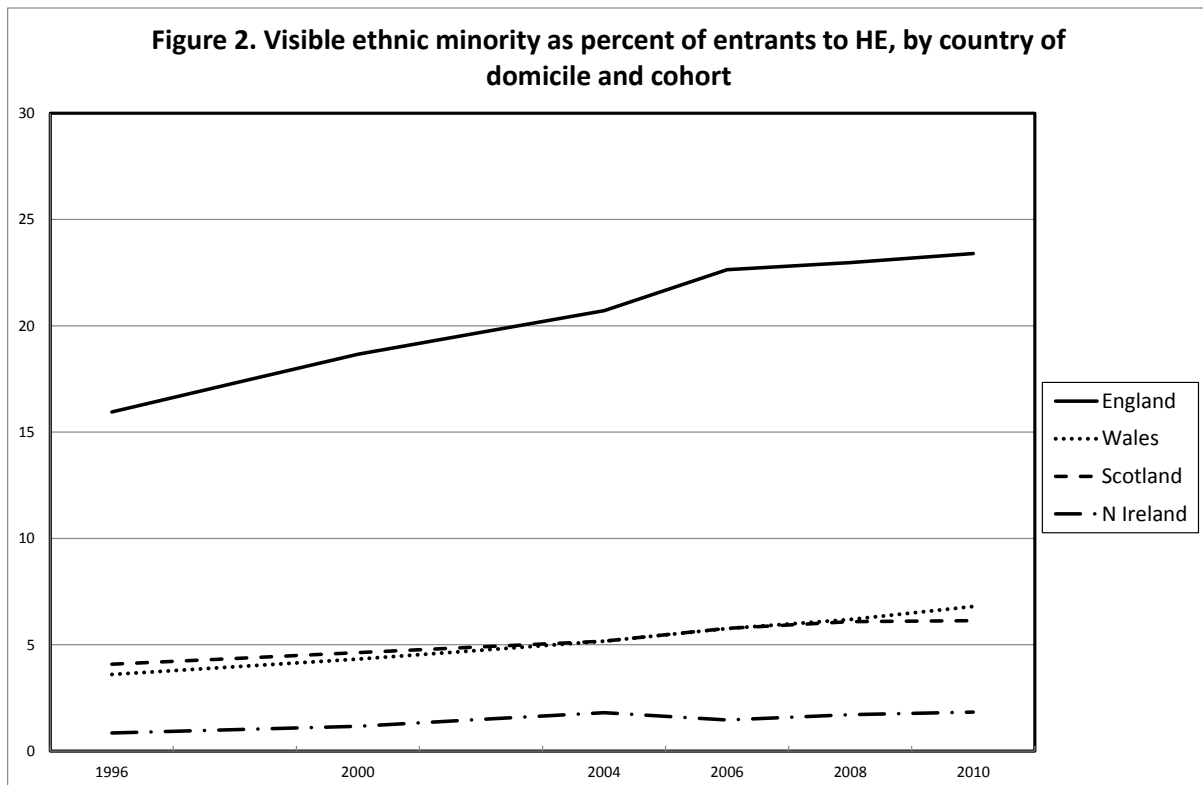
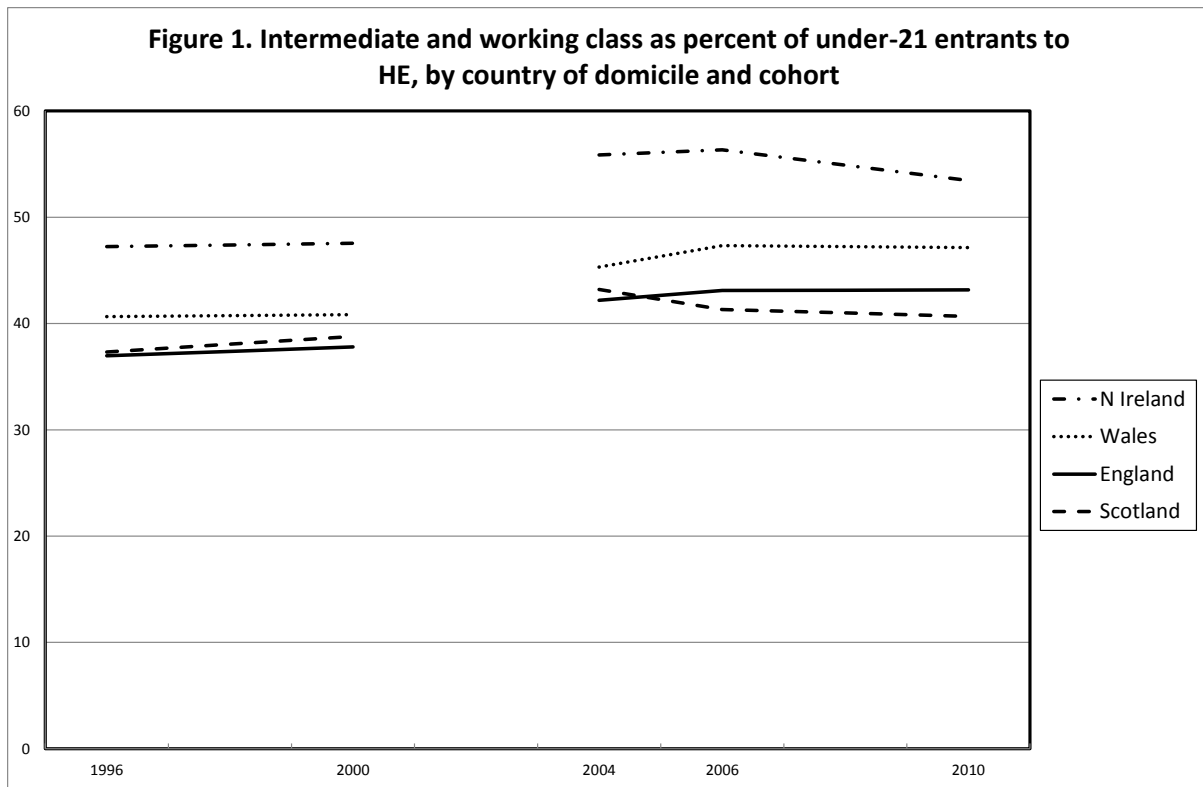


Figure 3. Intermediate and working class as percent of under-21 entrants to pre- and post-1992 universities, by country of domicile and cohort (England & Scotland only)

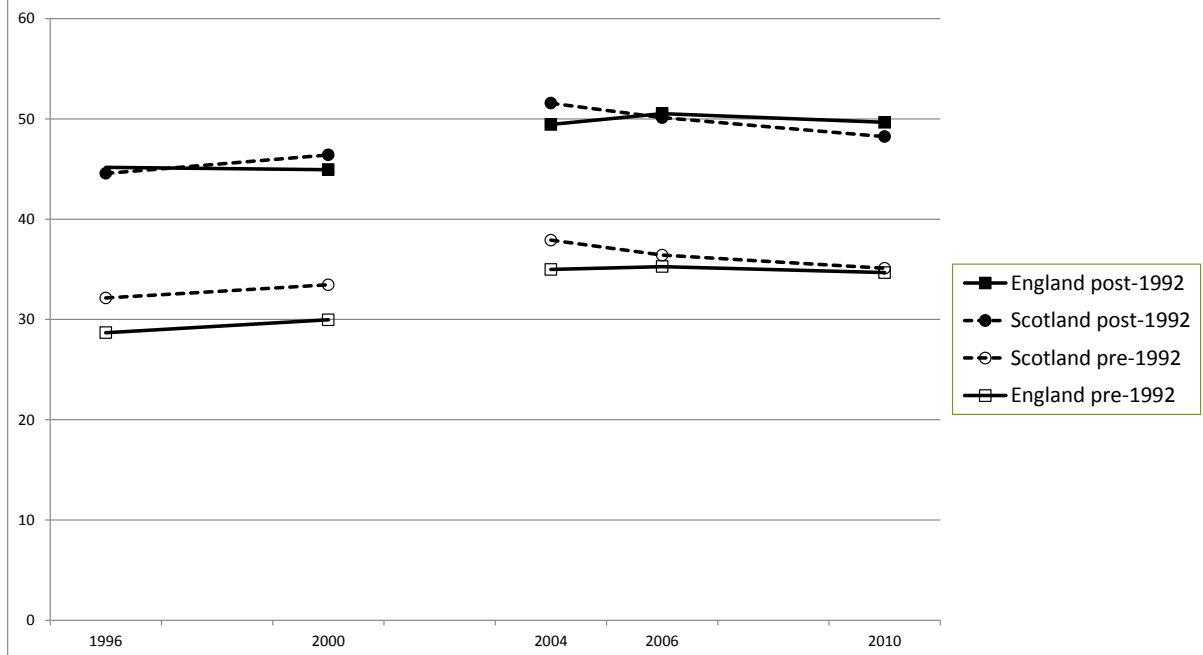


Figure 4. Visible ethnic minority as percent of entrants to pre- and post-1992 universities, by country of domicile and cohort (England and Scotland only)

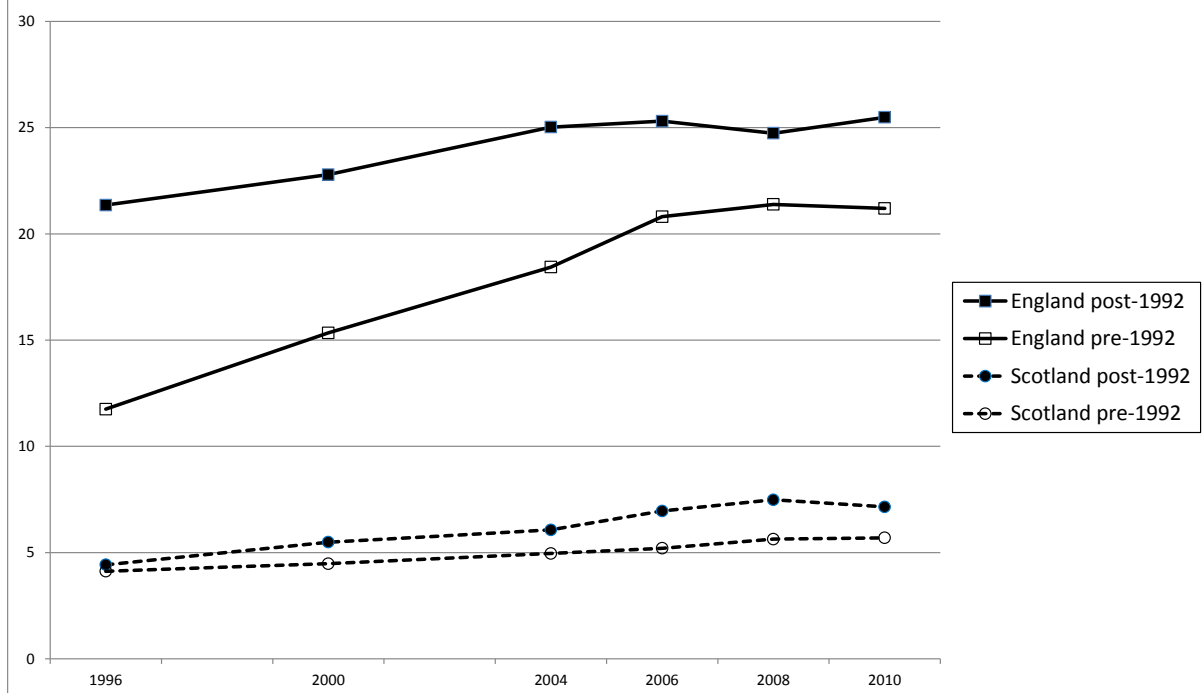


Table 1. Percent entering HE in another home country by social class and ethnicity, by country of domicile, 2010

	England	Wales	Northern Ireland	Scotland	All
All HE Entrants	4	35	34	6	7
<i>N</i>	338955	18150	13419	32091	402615
Prof & managerial class	5	44	39	7	8
Intermed & working class	3	31	30	4	6
Majority ethnic	5	35	34	5	8
Ethnic minority	2	39	56	12	3
White	5	35	34	5	8
Asian	1	41	55	10	2
Black	1	29	17	2
Other minority	3	42	58	13	4

Table 2. "Success rates": entrants as percent of applicants, by social class and by ethnicity, by country of domicile and cohort

		1996	2000	2004	2006	2008	2010
England	Professional & managerial class	76	82	84	83	83	76
	Intermediate & working class	71	77	80	80	79	69
	Majority ethnic	75	80	82	81	81	72
	Visible ethnic minority	68	76	78	77	77	67
Wales	Professional & managerial class	79	84	86	84	85	79
	Intermediate & working class	74	80	81	78	79	72
	Majority ethnic	77	81	83	79	81	75
	Visible ethnic minority	72	80	81	79	78	70
N Ireland	Professional & managerial class	66	76	80	77	82	74
	Intermediate & working class	59	69	74	70	78	67
	Majority ethnic	62	71	76	72	79	69
	Visible ethnic minority	61	77	77	70	79	66
Scotland	Professional & managerial class	78	82	79	79	80	73
	Intermediate & working class	72	78	75	73	74	65
	Majority ethnic	76	80	77	75	78	70
	Visible ethnic minority	72	75	73	71	71	62

Table 3. Logistic regression of (1) received an offer of a place (2) entered through the UCAS main-scheme and (3) entered HE (including through clearing): UK-domiciled under 21s who made at least one HE application through UCAS main scheme in 2010

	(1) Received offer			(2) Main-scheme entry			(3) Any entry	
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.
Qualifications score (normalised)	.620	.014		.845	.008		.788	.009
Qualifications score squared	-.062	.006		.092	.004		.015	.004
Qualifications score cubed	-.061	.003		-.096	.002		-.089	.002
Social class 2 Lower managerial & professional	-.044	.025		-.008	.012		-.022	.014
Social class 3 Intermediate	-.001	.027		-.008	.014		-.035	.015
Social class 4 Working class	-.064	.026		.005	.013		-.050	.015
Social class unclassified	-.076	.026		-.042	.013		-.063	.015
From independent school	-.108	.031		-.201	.014		-.261	.016
From FE college	.089	.026		.185	.015		.202	.017
Ethnic minority	-.233	.021		-.442	.010		.089	.012
Male	.710	.018		.071	.008		.093	.009
Number of applications (ref=4)	.476	.006		.066	.005		.195	.005
Wales	-.006	.038		.030	.023		.169	.025
N Ireland	.042	.054		-.299	.034		-.452	.031
Scotland	-.436	.035		-.229	.019		-.328	.021
Wales.qualifications score							.070	.025
Nl.qualifications score				.420	.036		.464	.039
Nl.qualifications score squared				-.112	.015		-.085	.017
Nl.qualifications score cubed				-.051	.009		-.050	.010
Scot.qualifications score	.050	.029		.566	.026		.575	.028
Scot.qualifications score squared	.094	.018		-.064	.012		-.038	.012
Scot.qualifications score cubed				-.032	.007		-.037	.007
Wales.ethnic minority	-.343	.125						
Scotland.ethnic minority	.391	.099					-.308	.060
N Ireland.male	.442	.106		.207	.041		.229	.044
Scotland.male	-.163	.048						
Scotland.independent school	.243	.100		.218	.055		.285	.059
Wales.FE college				.103	.049			
N Ireland. FE college	-.376	.136					.232	.093
Scotland.FE college	-.140	.059		.494	.043		.414	.044
Wales.Num applications	-.113	.024		-.041	.017		-.054	.019
N Ireland.Num applications	.135	.032		.052	.024			
Scotland.Num applications	-.068	.015		.039	.012		-.025	.012
Reference category	2.688	.022		.977	.011		1.416	.013

Notes: 1. The reference category is England, social class 1 (Higher managerial and professional, white, female, from a state-funded school, who made 4 applications through UCAS mainscheme, and had average prior qualifications.

2. Social class 1 = NS-SEC 1; class 2= NS-SEC 2: Lower managerial and professional, class 3= NS-SEC 3 and 4: Intermediate, small employers and own-account workers, class 4= NS-SEC 5, 6 and 7: Routine and manual: lower supervisory and technical, semi-routine and routine.

Table 4. Logistic regression of (1) received an offer from a pre-1992 university (2) entered a pre-1992 university through UCAS mainscheme and (3) entered a pre-1992 university (including clearing): under 21s in England and Scotland who made at least one application to a pre-1992 university in 2010

	(1) Received offer from pre-1992 university			(2) Main- scheme entry to pre-1992 university			(3) Any entry to pre- 1992 university	
	B	S.E.		B	S.E.		B	S.E.
Qualifications score (normalised)	.629	.013		1.084	.010		1.082	.010
Qualifications score squared	-.093	.006		.214	.005		.188	.005
Qualifications score cubed	-.063	.003		-.135	.003		-.138	.003
Social class 2 Lower managerial & professional	-.021	.020		-.034	.015		-.039	.015
Social class 3 Intermediate	.020	.022		-.034	.017		-.043	.018
Social class 4 Working class	-.061	.021		-.069	.017		-.085	.018
Social class unclassified	-.060	.022		-.053	.017		-.061	.017
From independent school	-.022	.026		.086	.015		.089	.016
From FE college	-.100	.023		.019	.023		.008	.023
Ethnic minority	-.407	.016		-.359	.013		-.155	.014
Male	.266	.013		-.015	.011		-.015	.011
Number of applications to pre-1992 universities (ref=4)	.774	.006		.561	.004		.647	.004
Scotland	-.613	.039		.118	.021		-.043	.023
Scot.qualifications score	.076	.026		.436	.024		.432	.024
Scot.qualifications score squared	.117	.017		-.172	.015		-.143	.015
Scotland.independent school	.254	.084						
Scotland.FE college	-.108	.055		.506	.061		.509	.061
Scotland.Num applications	-.071	.016					-.045	.013
Scotland.ethnic minority	.388	.077					-.265	.071
Reference category	2.880	.022		-.031	.014		.240	.015

Notes: see Table 3